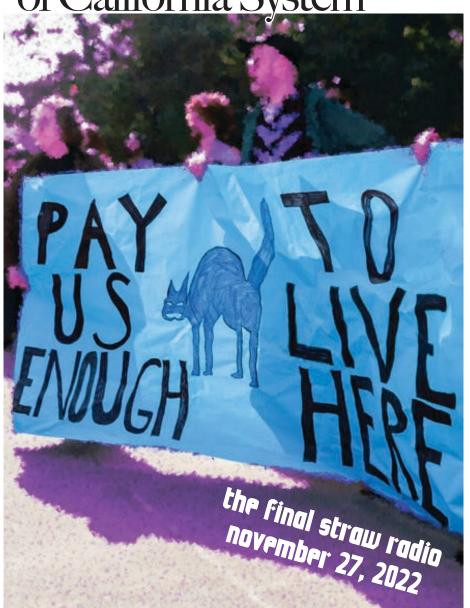
Grad Student Strikes In The University of California System



This week, Scott spoke with Rebecca Gross and Robin, Teaching Assistants at University of California Santa Cruz and members of UAW 2865 at the uni, to get informed about the ongoing strike in the UC system for, among other things, a cost of living increase demand for grad student employees and TA's.

The strike has extended throughout the UC system and picks up where the wildcat strikes of 2019 at that campus left off before the corona virus pandemic put so many things on hold. Similar strikes occurred earlier this year at Indiana University in Bloomington, are occurring in universities like New School in New York, as well as the system across the UK where the University College Union's 70,000 members have voted to strike. These labor actions also touch on issues of housing affordability, tuition costs, as well as non-academic staff and employees. Check our show notes for links and social media to learn more or see how you can support or get involved.

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TFSR: Can you all introduce yourselves with any names and pronouns that you want to use and any affiliations that you have?

Rebecca Gross: Yeah. My name is Rebecca Gross, my pronouns are she/they, and I guess for the purposes of this, I'm a TA at UC Santa Cruz, and I'm also a Head Steward with UAW 2865 for Santa Cruz.

Robin: My name is Robin, I use he/him pronouns. I am a grad worker at UC Santa Cruz. I am currently working as a TA...well, I'm currently on strike, but I have been working as a TA. Yeah, I'm a rank and file member of UAW 2865. And yeah, I guess I'm also a DSA member, if that's important as well, I don't know.

TFSR: Cool. Thank you so much for coming and talking with us today. So we're talking because there's a strike going on -- I think it's general in the University of California system, not only at Santa Cruz, right? Yeah, so multiple campuses. But maybe we can just start with a little bit of background, what led to the strike? Who's involved, what kind of workers and what the workers are looking for?

RG: Yeah. So the strike has been building at UC Santa Cruz, specifically, for a long time now. Although this is currently a larger strike than just UC Santa Cruz, the COLA Demand, the Cost Of Living Adjustment Demand, has been brewing at Santa Cruz for three plus years. And back in 2019-2020, we had a wildcat strike that started at UC Santa Cruz.

So when I talk about what we're demanding, COLA is at the top of the list, because currently our baseline pay is pitiful, it's \$24,000 a year, and that is taxable income. We ended up taking home less than \$20,000, after student fees and things like that. We're asking for \$54,000 a year to keep up with inflation and rising rent costs. And the idea is that this would help remove rent burden, and would make it so that grad workers don't end up spending more than 30% of their wages on rent. And at UC Santa Cruz 54k probably won't even do that, because Santa Cruz is so expensive, but it will make it so we're not severely rent burdened. So that's really what I'm passionate about right now, and why I'm here fighting for this. But Robin, also, you're an international student, so maybe you also have a different perspective with some of the other demands on the table.

R: Yeah, I mean, just to jump off of that, with the COLA Demand to start

out: I think the issue of rent burden is very deeply felt on this campus. I moved here last September, in order to pursue my PhD program and to work here as a TA. I quickly noticed that many of my friends here, particularly, international students, and people coming from further afield, were ending up in these really bad housing situations. In some instances living in the same space as the landlord, and often dealing with, at best, kind of weird living situations, but at worst, even more abusive type scenarios. I had friends who moved out of that situation and ended up living in the Best Western hotel. And this was kind of one of the "solutions" that the university offered to address the housing crisis.

But really it's not a solution at all because the folks who are living there are still in rent burden, still spending large percentages of their wages on rent, and also not having access to a kitchen. I had one friend from my program, who's an international student, he moved here from Turkey, and he ended up in the Best Western and was dealing with bedbugs in his room. So, I think this demand, the demand for a cost of living adjustment to increase our wages, such that they're commensurate with the rise in rental costs here in Santa Cruz, it's very deeply felt here, but it's also one that has gone statewide. And I think people on other UC campuses are also feeling a lot of the same crunch that we're feeling here. I think that's been really important to how the strike is going to play out, the kind of widespread resonance of that demand, and how the rent burden issue is affecting us all.

TFSR: Yeah, thank you for all that background. And yeah, you think about Santa Cruz and that area and imagine the rents are pretty high. I'm also in academia and whenever I look at contingent jobs, I'm thinking "Will the salary be able to pay my rent?" and it's obviously even a worse situation for grad students who don't make even a baseline salary that a one year contract faculty would have.

You know, one thing that just came to mind when you were talking about this is also the connection -- I don't know if you have thoughts on this -- but that a lot of these cities now are kind of waging war against unhoused people. And it seems to me this situation that you're outlining in terms of what students are experiencing is connected to that issue, because I'm imagining certain students are unhoused, living in cars, too. Have you made any kind of connections with people off campus in terms of like work going on to protect unhoused people?

RG: Yeah, I mean, you're totally right about students experiencing housing and food insecurity and not having, both undergrads as well as grads, deal with this. I can say that a lot of support has come in from the community, because I think that they see this struggle as related to their own. Food Not Bombs, which is huge in Santa Cruz, they are always some of the folks that come out to help us when we need to feed people. People on the picket line will invite other community members from other unions to come speak. Faculty have been very supportive, by and large, because they understand that we can't afford to live here, and that this could be this is really a pivotal moment, I think the way they see it.

Of course, you have the fringe folks that are like "well, I have to go through it so you should too", but by and large, I think that this is seen as a community struggle, and one that is dealing with rent burden in California as a whole. And hopefully, once we get our COLA, we can help others get theirs at their workplaces. So, like Robin mentioned, he's a part of DSA, I'm also a part of DSA, and we're doing a lot of work in our labor working group to unionize various institutions and make sure that we can share what's going on at UC Santa Cruz in the COLAs struggle with other members of the community and other workplaces.

R: Yeah, and just to add to that, many of us from UAW 2865 here at Santa Cruz were out there on the picket lines a few weeks ago when the city workers in SEIU went on strike. And that's really like being reciprocated as well. A number of other unions have come out in support of us, including the bus drivers here in Santa Cruz have refused to cross the picket line. I believe UPS [drivers, as well]. We've been trying to link up with other organizations, especially labor organizing, going on in the area to make sure that the COLA isn't just something that we win as grad workers, but can be something that we sort of help other unions and other movements fight for too.

I could also say that myself and some other people from from our union were out in the past few weeks canvassing for the "empty homes tax", to try to tax the second and third homes of very rich people that they don't actually live in these homes, and use that money to try and address the housing crisis and issues of that unhoused people face here in Santa Cruz. So, we're trying to sort of link up with other movements, struggles, unions, and we've seen a lot of that reciprocated, I think, in the past few days, as we've gone on strike as well.

TFSR: That's awesome. Thanks for pointing out all those connections. It's really interesting to see the solidarity and the ways that you all are moving outside of the campus to do other projects. I imagine also, like you're saying, if UC does a cost of living adjustment that's a huge win for all workers, especially in the state, because UC is such a huge employer. But yeah, I guess maybe some more specific questions about the strike, like: how long has the strike been going on? And what has it been like on the picket line? Has there been a lot of repression? And you've talked a little bit about the support, but what's going on there?

RG: Yeah. Well, we've officially withheld labor for the last five days. Well, we've had a picket Monday through Friday, but the labor itself now has been withheld for I guess, seven. Which is really exciting. This is an open ended strike, which means sometimes when people go on strike, it's like, "Okay, we're gonna withhold our labor for three days, and then we'll be back just to give them a piece of our mind, show them what we're worth". But we actually are in a real position of power here because we have no plans to go back to work. And it's really exciting. I'm kind of getting goosebumps just thinking about it. Because this week is a short week because of the holiday on Thursday and Friday, and so we are going to be at the picket Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and plan to go into the long weekend continuing to withhold our labor.

In terms of the length of the strike and where it's at, there is continuous bargaining happening between the university and the bargaining teams, and it doesn't seem like a lot of movement has taken place on the university side. They're not willing to give us an offer of more than 7% increase in our wages, which would be like \$250 extra dollars a quarter, it's ridiculous. That's not going to pay the rent, you know? So we're sort of stalled and just going to continue doing what we've been doing until they actually start taking our demand seriously. And this is 40,000 people to be clear, that are on strike, because it's four different units across UAW: we have student researchers, we have the 2865 unit, which is like TAs, grad student instructors, tutors, then we have the postdocs and the academic researchers. So the huge contingent of the university spread really widely.

R: Yeah, to echo what Rebecca was saying, we've just been out there for one week now and we really haven't seen any movement on the administration's end toward coming up with a more reasonable proposal to address the rent burden issue that we're facing. And I mean, my thinking is

that we need to dig our heels in and prepare for the possibility of a much longer strike, a more sustained strike, in order to actually force the concessions that we need to see to address the rent burden here.

TFSR: What labor are you withholding? And also is the timing strategic in terms of it being towards the end of term?

RG: Yeah, so currently, the labor that's being withheld is, for me personally as a TA: I'm not teaching my section, I'm not going to the lectures of the class that I TA for, I'm not communicating with my students about course materials, although if they do reach out with a question about the strike, or about when they can come to the picket line to help, I will respond. And I would say it is strategic in terms of when we chose to go on strike. We had a lot of meetings over the summer and through the first part of the quarter, about this potential strike, having a feeling that this is where bargaining was going in terms of a stalemate. We chose mid November, as Robin mentioned, a lot of us were working on things like the empty homes tax, and we didn't want to be distracted, or anyone else to be distracted by the midterm elections.

And we also wanted to situate this in week eight of the quarter gearing up for this Thanksgiving break that was coming, and then all of a sudden we're in week 10 after that. And then week 11 is finals week, right? So this gives us, hopefully we're not too tired by the time finals week comes and there's still good energy on the picket line feeling like we can still be there, and we can still withhold things like teaching and grades, and for researchers it's things like not going into their lab, not reporting their research results, similar things for post-doctorate students as well.

R: Yeah, I'm also withholding my labor in terms of not teaching sections, not attending lectures, not doing the readings for the class that I'm TAing for, and not responding to course related questions from students. Again, we're trying to keep open like a line of communication so that students have information about the strike, they know how things are going, and they know how to come out and support us if they want to do that. And, yeah, I've been really happy to see many of my students out on the picket line over the past five days coming out to support us.

TFSR: You know, you're talking about how you had support from faculty. I'm wondering, in particular, if you're TAing, what that means

in terms of the person teaching the class that you are an assistant for?

RG: Yeah, it's a good question. And it's really different for every single individual that is a TA. Like I'm TAing for a lecturer, which means that he's part of AFT, the adjunct lecturers union at UC statewide. It's different than...he's not on a tenure track, and he teaches like eight classes across four different institutions. He has it rough, right? In terms of shared struggles, I see his struggle as mine and I really do think he sees my struggle as his. They have a no strike clause, so he really cannot withhold his labor in terms of teaching classes unless he's willing to risk a very real possibility of being fired. And so he's still continuing to teach his classes on Zoom, which he agrees and he knows is indeed crossing the picket line. However, he has agreed to withhold other things. For example, he's dropped the class attendance policy. So if a student decides that they want to go to the picket, instead of going to the lecture, he's not going to discipline them or reprimand them for that at all. He's also not going to pick up my labor of grading, he's not going to teach my sections. So there are various things that he's able to do in solidarity with us.

Faculty have it a lot easier, in that they have nothing to worry about if they're on a tenure track, or they're tenured. So I think we've had pretty widespread support from faculty, they've been marching down everyday with a banner. They've been there singing songs, they've been leading reading workshops on the line and talking about labor. So it's been great to see them there and to have their support.

And Robin, I know that you are actually a TA for another grad student and an organizer. So how's that? I don't know. How's that for you, Robin?

R: Yeah. So, in my case, the course that I'm TAing is being taught by a graduate student instructor, or GSI, so he's been on strike with the rest of us, actually. He's actually one of the core, kind of most involved, organizers in our union here at UCSC. What's interesting about those positions is that, so essentially when graduate students here at UCSC have completed their coursework and their qualifying exams, we are actually eligible to teach our own courses in certain instances, in certain departments. My department is one of those. However, the pay for doing that is actually, it's not a whole lot higher than a standard TA salary, but it's quite a bit more work. So, graduate student instructors, by and large, have been out there with us, alongside us on the picket line.

We've seen a lot of support from faculty, as well, as Rebecca was mentioning. I think it will just be important for faculty to understand that the potential for this to go on for a more extended period of time -- if the UC continues bargaining in the way that they have and basically stone-walling and ignoring our demands -- that would mean a longer and more sustained strike. I'm confident that faculty will understand the reasons why this is happening. It's not because we want to be on strike forever. It's because we need to, to make real concessions.

RG: And I'll just add to that: if they don't and they go back to teaching their classes -- and I've heard some rumors that that might happen in my department, the Literature Department -- they're scabs.

TFSR: Classic.

RG: They're not standing in solidarity with our struggle and that's a shame. So we're going to keep organizing our own folks and other grad workers, and hope that we continue to have the faculty support, but in the case they don't...it's not our job to organize them. It's their job to do that amongst themselves. So I hope they continue to withhold their labor as well in solidarity with us, but at this point we're really just worried about connecting with other grad workers and saying "Hey, how are you feeling? Are you experiencing retaliation? Like, how can we support you? Can you come to the line today? There's free food here for you. There's a community here."

TFSR: I was just joking that literature professors as scabs is classic. I guess one difference that I hear listening to you is that you already have unions. I know at other campuses where people are trying to unionize, the tenure faculty can often be a huge obstacle to that because they don't see themselves...I mean, there's like a real caste system between, tenured, tenure track, contingent faculty, postdocs, all the others that you've mentioned who are going on strike at your campus. It seems like you're saying you don't have to deal with the faculty because you have your own union, and so they can't really stand in your way, they can only just show support or not. I wonder, though, what kind of talks have you had with people in advance of the strike to prepare for it? For the faculty.

RG: Yeah, well, my department sent out a letter to our faculty as soon as the strike authorization vote went out, saying that everyone who voted, signed this letter, and basically was like "we really want your support, we would really like for you to cancel your classes". You know, so there was communication channels there. But just recently, this past week, we saw in the STEM {Science, Technology, Engineering & Mathematics] departments, in STEM division, some faculty members were basically strike busting, sending out emails to grad workers saying "you're not allowed to be on strike, because part of your duties are your student duties, and this is a student conduct issue". That's strike busting, and that's not lawful. We were able to really organize around that, because we have our union, and because there are protections when you have a union and you're on strike. So we are definitely in a privileged position on that front, to have the good union lawyers and all of that. But yeah, Robin, what do you think about that question? I feel like that's my orientation around it.

R: Yeah. I want to emphasize the faculty within my department have been really supportive so far and have been canceling their lectures and refusing to cross the picket line, and have written letters in support of our demands, in solidarity with us. Yeah, I mean, our focus is definitely on what we can do as grad workers, and getting people out to the picket line, talking to people who are on strike, talking to people who for whatever reason are still working and trying to convince them to join us. That's sort of been our focus and so far, the response for faculty, I think, has been really good. I think that will continue.

TFSR: The obstruction from STEM is another classic thing I've heard in terms of unionizing struggles. But I was wondering, with that kind of argument that they made to the students -- maybe you haven't had to deal with this, because you already have the union -- but one of the issues that I think comes up when you're talking about grad student striking, and even faculty, is the kind of mythology or the cultural ideas about student that that is not work that it's something different than than labor that can be withheld. That you all are following a vocation that you've made the deal to live an impoverished life or something [laughs] so that you can read books all day. I mean, have you had to deal with any of that kind of baggage in the discourse around the strike?

RG: You know, I think it's really rare if that does happen. I've heard a couple folks that sort of reinforced what I call the "hazing model", which is just the "we all had to do it, so you should, too". But as Robin mentioned, and to reiterate this, the faculty support, by and large, is huge and it's there. And also the lecturers support, the adjunct support. In the case of the adjuncts, when you say, "Hey, once we get our COLA, let's help get you one. Let's negotiate, let's help you all go on strike". The AFT contract last year was in the works of renegotiating and they took a less than great deal at the 11th hour. And when I talked to other lecturers, I'm like, "you know, you shouldn't have had to deal with that as a grad worker, that sucks. No one should have to deal with being rent burdened and struggling." So let's help change that, at any level of someone's career.

And in the case of the faculty, they've been really supportive. These few people that are doing this strike busting stuff... Like we had a huge March and rally and picket in response to that on Friday afternoon. I would say probably 350 to 400 people were marching through the streets and then it culminated in a blockade for a little while that was very peaceful and a great rally down at the base of campus. That's the energy we need to bring to show them that's not acceptable behavior. We have more bodies on the ground then than they have, entirely.

R: So I guess in terms of perceptions around intellectual labor versus other kinds of labor, I think we've seen a lot of support from, for instance, people involved in the Starbucks unionizing campaigns. Obviously, as I mentioned, from the bus drivers, and from people in the city workers union, who saw us come up to their picket, and now they've come up to ours as well to show their solidarity. I think my perception is, yeah, okay, some people may have these ideas about what it is that academic workers do, but by and large, I think other workers in different sectors, different fields, understand that a victory for us will only benefit them as well. And that it's one struggle.

This sort of question of STEM departments and getting them more involved: I think, compared to -- I wasn't here yet for it -- but compared to the Wildcat strike back in 2019-2020, our STEM departments have done fantastic work to get themselves a lot more organized, especially with the formation of Student Researchers United across the UC. Research positions in certain STEM departments that previously would not have been under a union now are with Student Researchers United. I think a lot of the divisions that may have previously existed or unevenness

between STEM and Humanities and Social Science departments, some of that has broken down. And we've managed to do a better job of organizing across different fields and different different types of work as well.

TFSR: That's really good to hear. I want to ask maybe a little bit more about the previous strike. But before that, I did have another question about how you're connecting with other workers on campus who are not professors or students, like the facilities workers, the people in the cafeteria, or even administration?

RG: Yeah, I believe that the folks that are custodial workers and working in food services on campus... there's a couple tricky things there. One, I think some of them are represented by AFSCME [American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees], and I think might have a no strike clause. This is something I would love to double check with some folks after this meeting and just make sure that I'm correct about that. The other thing is that student workers that work in places like cafes, and cafeterias on campus, they actually are not unionized and have not been allowed to be unionized. So that's really challenging in terms of enabling them to feel like they can stop work, because, as we've already said, they're also experiencing things like food and housing insecurity, and these exorbitantly high tuition costs. So that's a challenge. And I don't believe we've been able to effectively organize, getting solidarity strikes from folks that work in cafes and cafeterias.

However, we have succeeded in getting all of the Metro buses that normally go through campus to stop doing that loop. So they essentially get to our picket, they take a left, they go up the road, and then they turn around and go back down toward downtown, instead of going through our campus. So that's a huge disruption. We also have prevented UPS from going on to campus and sending deliveries during the picket hours. And the last thing we've been recently working on is getting construction halted on our campus, and that's huge. So that's really an exciting development. I'm trying to think of other kinds of spheres of campus activity, but those three ways have been really, really primary ways we've shut it down thus far. Robin, did I miss anything there?

R: I'm not sure if I know enough, honestly, on this question to speak on it. Sorry about that.

TFSR: That's cool. That was great.

So yeah, I mean, going back to the Wildcat strike in 2019-2020, that was really inspiring and amazing to hear about. And then the pandemic kind of hit and everything seemed to sort of come to a halt. That also was a strike, maybe it's because it was Wildcat -- I don't know if you have information about it -- but it had a lot of violent repression from cops. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about the relationship between your action now and what happened before? I mean, you've talked a little bit maybe about some of the lessons you've learned, but maybe what's going on, what's different? Because it seems like you aren't facing the same kind of repression, at least now.

RG: Yeah. Robin, do you want to take this one first?

R: Sure. Yeah. So I wasn't here yet for the Wildcat strike -- I started my program the year after -- but my understanding is that that action really set the tone for demands that are now just more familiar to us all. I think the language of "rent burden", this kind of understanding that we shouldn't be spending half of our wages or even a third of our monthly wages on rent, that this is not a sustainable situation, the cost of living adjustment or COLA demand, I think the Wildcat strike was really seminal in creating awareness of these issues, and setting the tone for a statewide strike on all the UC campuses.

I think, from what I've heard from organizers who were involved in the Wildcat, is that essentially things just happened very quickly and almost kind of organically in a sense. A small handful of people had been launching a campaign, throughout the fall quarter around the rent burden issue, and all of a sudden the language really connected with people, and the COLA demand really took off. And basically they were getting emails from people that they didn't even know saying, "we need to withhold our grades". People were turning up to union meetings and saying, "we need to take action, we need to go on strike now." What I think is really great is that the organizers who were involved in it reacted to that, they seized the moment and they realized that the time was ripe to withhold labor to go on a strike.

At the same time this time around we just had much more time for preparation and organization. We've coordinated it across many different campuses. That gives us a lot more power because it's not just UC Santa Cruz, it's across the UC. We have certain legal protections that we didn't

have last time around because it's a union endorsed strike. That gives us a bit of an advantage and just talking to other workers and addressing concerns that people might have, particularly international students or students who are otherwise more vulnerable. think that action, which is really just kind of a classic instance of workers self organizing at a moment of heightened intensity, and something that just happened very quickly, has really set the tone for what we're trying to do now. Which I think can be a longer, more sustained strike, involving not just withholding grades -- which was the big thing last time around -- but withholding all of our labor. I think this time around, we've got an even better chance of actually winning a COLA.

RG: Yeah, I agree with everything Robins said and I'll just add that, in terms of the police presence, it's been really great to not see the police get lined up in their SWAT gear, which is terrifying and really scary, particularly, as Robin mentioned, for folks that are undocumented, for Black and Brown folks in the community, for undergrads that are just there in solidarity with us. And we're hoping to really keep it that way. I understand there's a lot of folks that are really excited about prospects of physically shutting campus down, and that's fair, and that's exciting and I've been there too. However, because this is such a long, sustained effort, and we're hoping to be on the line for for as long as it takes to get this cost of living adjustment, we don't need people that are brutalized by the cops, we don't need folks going and having to spend their energy doing jail support. We will be there, we will be there if we have to. But if we can avoid it and use another tactic to contribute to our strategy I think that's really important right now.

Something I'll also say, this is the cops strategy too. It looked really bad for them last time when they were photographed brutalizing people. So this is, I think, a concerted effort and strategy on the UCs end and on the cops and to not do that right now, and that could change at any moment. So we're prepared for that to change. We really hope it doesn't.

TFSR: Yeah, I mean, it's always the cops decision to escalate it to violence. Not like, yeah that would be the strategy to try to pull the cups out, because that doesn't really help anyone. In terms of that strike, in relation to this, were there gains that were made? And how do you think the pandemic affected that, and also since it's ongoing, your current strike action?

R: I know that we won a small housing stipend last time around, so nothing in the order of magnitude that would actually address rent burden. Basically the administration just throwing us a little bone hoping that that would kind of deflate some of the energy that was arising at the time. I'm not sure if I know the timeline well enough to speak to exactly the impact that the pandemic had the last time around...

RG: My understanding is that the pandemic seems to be one of the things that shut down the strike. I don't know, I think energy was probably also dwindling outside of that. I think it's exhausting to be on an unsanctioned strike for a month plus, but at the same time, definitely the pandemic, I think organizers were starting to even get sick, not necessarily with COVID, because we didn't know COVID was around, but people were getting bad flu's at the end, in early February, which definitely could have been COVID, [sickness was] starting to go around even within the picket. So, my understanding is COLA happens, strike happens, and then COVID starts. But things did come out of it: we also have five year job security, and I don't think that was across the board in every single department and last time. When I signed my contract, I'm in my second year of my program. I have five years of employment no matter what. Which is fantastic. And that came out of some of the discourse from the Wildcat as well.

R: I mean, I think the biggest thing that came out of it, certainly we did see some small wins, but the biggest thing that came out of it was networks of organization and struggle that were activated that time. Especially bringing students who they weren't involved in labor organizing, or an activism before, kind of into the fold. Many of those same networks have persisted up till today. That's been huge for us this time around.

On the question of the pandemic, I wanted to add one thing: I think something important that we've learned also, is that in the times of COVID, the picket line is not merely like a physical thing, right? So we are asking people to cancel their lectures, their sections completely, and not to just move on to Zoom, because we moved on to Zoom for a pretty extended period with the pandemic, and we know that the university can still run on Zoom. So thinking of the picket line as not just a physical thing, that's one important lesson that we've probably learned.

TFSR: Yeah, it's interesting. When I was at NYU, at one point, there

was a strike that faculty, to try to stand in solidarity, would just have their classes off-campus. At that time the strikers said that was okay by them, but then looking back thought that that was not really a good decision. So, it's interesting to hear that with Zoom, too. I mean first of all, it's labor, but also, like you said, the university knows now that it can function perfectly fine virtually. So it doesn't it's not as much of a disruption.

RG: Right.

R: Absolutely. Yeah.

TFSR: We've talked a little bit about the tactic of withholding grades, I was talking to someone about that strike who was involved. And they said that that was really powerful. I wonder if you had thoughts on why you think that is. They were talking about it in terms of accreditation and what the university is actually bestowing on students, but I don't know if you have thoughts on that, and how that fits into your overall strategy.

RG: Well, I will say that this time around there's been, as Robin alluded to, so much planning, getting ready for this, and each day there's so much organization that goes into it. So, we haven't, to be completely honest, we're not there yet. We're not necessarily thinking this time around about withholding grades specifically, although I'm sure that in the coming weeks we will be talking about this. But from what I've heard about the Wildcat and what that did, it really also linked undergraduate tuition dollars with grades. And that's not a great look for a higher ed institution to basically just be passing out grades and it really links grades as this commodity that undergrads are paying for.

So, I think from a theoretical point of view was really powerful. But in terms of like the material disruption, undergrads oftentimes need those grades for various things, right? Things that the university stipulates. So things like financial aid, and sure, me saying that could seem like it's a huge disruption for undergrads -- obviously that's not our intention -- but when undergrads come to me, and they say, "I need this grade, because I need to be able to get financial aid for next quarter. I need to say that I passed all my classes last quarter", I'm like, "I hear you, I'm with you, I'll help you figure this out. But really this is the university that is pre-

venting you from getting your financial aid because you're not receiving a grade. They want you to think it's me that's causing this problem, but it's them". So I think it also produces a tool for us to align with our undergrads and disrupt their business as usual, and say, "Hey, this is disruptive. This is rough. This is difficult. How can we work together to get the university to budge and give us what we need to be able to work and teach here?" So, I think that that's where a lot of this power lies.

Also, as you mentioned, Scott, I think there is some stuff about the UC receiving certain funding and certain grants, and this making its way into certain end of the year reports and things like that, to clout "oh, we had this many students that passed with flying colors", whatever. But I think of it more in terms of the ability to connect with undergrads and show them that we're in the same struggle and this disrupting them is part of our need to collectively disrupt the university at large.

R: Yeah, I would add that, in many ways, I think we, as academic workers, believe in the university's mission much more than the university itself does. I'm speaking in terms of the administration here. Part of what we're fighting for is to have more time to dedicate to each individual student, to fostering productive spaces for discussion and that would mean things like smaller class sizes, more personal attention from TA's toward students. I mean these are all things that we can't do very well when many of us are worried about getting evicted, or having to choose between paying rent and eating well, or healthcare. And I think we increasingly see this kind of commoditized, or neoliberal model of the university as this product where you pay tuition and then you get grades, right? And I think it's actually us as academic workers who are on the frontlines of fighting against that, and fighting to provide a much better model of public education for our students.

That being said, we're gonna see how much the university actually cares about that, through this strike. I mean, it may be the case that they're okay with sections not being taught. It might be that we have to take this all the way to the end of the quarter, and to the extra leverage that we'll get from withholding grades. As Rebecca was saying, we don't know if it's going to go that far. But we're ready for it if that's what has to happen.

TFSR: Yeah. Thanks, both of you, for that. I like the way that you outlined it, Rebecca, in terms of this is a place of potential solidarity between undergrads and graduate students, but clearly the university

would try to pin it on the graduate students and say "deal with them, they're the ones who are harming you", without at all referencing the way that they allocate their funds not towards supporting the people. I think the way that you describe that, Robin, too, in terms of the time that you have to give to the labor is completely used up by just trying to survive [laughs in an exasperated way]. Anyway, I don't know why I'm waxing on that, I have a lot I could talk to you about [laughs], but I want to ask you just a couple more questions.

There's other actions going on other campuses right now. I know New School, I think part time faculty are striking there. I know people in the UK are about to strike. And there's other unionization struggles on different campuses that I've been in touch with people, just wondering what connections you all have to people outside the UC system, if there's any strategizing or collaboration that's going on that you can mention.

RG: I haven't personally been part of these conversations, but I know that last year, or two years ago I guess, when Columbia workers were on strike, there were a lot of discussions happening between folks that were here at Santa Cruz during the Wildcat and folks at Columbia strategizing and sharing stories and experiences and strategies. And then coming out of the Columbia strikes they have now shared their experiences and strategies and what worked and what didn't work with us. So that's been great. Also, over the summer, we did like a strike school series. So we had big Zoom rooms with panels of folks talking about their experience. We talked to the West Virginia teachers Wildcat strike that happened...I forget the year to be honest, I have to check that but...I don't remember.

TFSR: Yeah I'm blanking on that too. Was it before COVID or during COVID?

RG: It was before, I think it was before.

TFSR: It was like 2019 probably.

RG: Had to be around then. And I mean, hearing their stories was super inspiring. So there have been these conversations with folks at different unions, at different institutions all across the country. Other organizers at Santa Cruz have really spearheaded that project. So I can, if you would

like more info on that, Scott, I'm also happy to drop a line to some of those folks and ask if they can talk to you about that more.

TFSR: Yeah, I mean, that's cool to get as many voices in.

R: We had, throughout the summer especially, a few different Zoom calls with different labor organizing projects. The Columbia people and the West Virginia teachers, and I think there was maybe one or two more as well.

TFSR: I know that UC had a pretty strong Cops Off Campus campaign, has that connected at all to the labor strike?

RG: Um, I think it's huge. First of all, it's one of our demands.

TFSR: Oh ok.

RG: We're bargaining for cops off campus.

TFSR: That's great.

RG: I don't think I've been in any of the Zoom sessions where this has been addressed, and that means one of two things: either I just haven't been there, or the UC has not been addressing it.

TFSR: Likely.

RG: It could be a combination of both. So this is something we're bargaining for. And I mean, I see it as huge, because when people ask me things like "well, where's the COLA money?" I'm like, "it's going to the cops". And elsewhere, but if we are to effectively get cops off campus, that budget could easily be redistributed to to give grad workers COLAs.

R: Yeah, just to add to that, I think sometimes in their dealings with us the administration wants to separate out these different kinds of demands. Not that there's been any movement on the wages thing, either, but to dismiss things like cops off campus, or disability demands around COVID as like "activist demands", which I think is really quite patronizing actually. And, on our end, I think, as Rebecca was pointing out, we view these

things as interconnected. Money that could be spent toward graduate workers and giving us living wages is being directed toward things like campus policing instead. So I think it's important to keep emphasizing those interconnections even as the line of the administration is to try and separate these things out, sometimes.

TFSR: Yeah, that's interesting there to make that distinction between a "labor" demand and an "activist" demand.

My last question is just what can people do to support you, from other places, or any ways to connect or plugin if there's ways that people can help?

RG: Yeah, yeah. I will send you a link to post to the Statewide Hardship Fund, which is going to be something that people are able to apply for if they're really in a hard place. If our wages get docked and people need a little extra, we do have a strike fund and we do have strike pay from UAW, which is really fantastic that our union has that. But for folks with children or folks that have medical expenses, things like this, we have the hardship fund, so I can send that link over. But in general, I think just finding ways to put pressure on the University. I'm a fan of taking to Twitter, taking to Instagram, you can follow us [on Twitter and Instagram] @PayUsMoreUCSC. And the statewide campaign at @FairUCNow [TikTok]. I think that's what I would say, is just keep an eye on the campaign.

R: I would encourage people in the community to turn up to the picket line and just come talk to us. Talk to people about their living situations, about our demands, about what is exciting us, what is keeping us out here day after day. And I would encourage people to also talk to their neighbors, their friends, their community, about the strike. Raise awareness and think about what organizations you're in, what networks you're in, and can you talk to coworkers, for instance, or people in maybe a community organization, get a letter of solidarity out, that sort of thing would be huge. I would encourage people to just start where they are and try to build some support from there. Yeah, I hope to see people join us out on the picket line, and I'm really looking forward to talking to anyone who comes out.

TFSR: Awesome. Thanks so much for taking the time and maybe, hopefully we can get an update with some really good news about

what's going on. So, yeah, power to you all. Anything that you want to say in closing?

RG: I don't think so. Just really thank you so much for taking the time and for covering this, having the support from folks with platforms is huge. And I just really appreciate you offering to do this.

TFSR: Of course. Yeah. And we'll link to all this stuff in the show notes when we post this and yeah, thank you so much.

R: Yeah, absolutely. Thanks so much.



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